

# Reproducing Fishers of Men

with Bill Smith and Galen Currah

<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/reproducing-fishers-of-men>

Dr. Ralph Winter once told me that, when he was in officers' training for World War II, the Navy considered it important for their officers to display skill and experience in every social situation. Their curriculum thus included three weeks of intensive training together in every major sport—from volleyball to cricket.

Jesus used group interaction to train His followers to become disciples—fully equipped to train others in complete, Spirit-led, loving obedience to all His commands. Where Jesus' training model is adapted today, the results are still “turning the world upside down.”

## *Jesus' Training Model*

Jesus is recorded twenty times in the New Testament as saying “Follow me.” This command brought a small group into a training relationship—with Jesus and with one another. Through these relationships Jesus

turned His disciples into “fishers of men” (Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17),<sup>2</sup> and

trained them in loving obedience (Jn 14:15) to train others (Mt 28:19–20).

Following His resurrection, Christ commissioned those He had trained to

wait for the Holy Spirit's empowering (Ac 1:4), and then

train all peoples to obey everything He had commanded (Mt 28:19–20).

Jesus didn't explain in advance everything His disciples would need to know; instead He gave them His Holy Spirit to continue their training after His departure (Jn 16:13). With the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowering, the disciples then trained others to follow Jesus just as He had trained them—through modeling, practice, transparency and discussion.<sup>3</sup>

Consider these essential components of what Jesus gave the disciples:

A living example of what complete obedience looks like.

Training in working with the Holy Spirit.

Guided experience to develop appropriate skills.

Group obedience to overcome individual hesitance.

Clear assignments, feedback and correction.

Empowering disciples to make other disciples.

The Church in Acts had no written record of Jesus' teachings, and Jesus drew others to Himself so quickly that there were soon too many followers for most to have direct contact with the Twelve. Yet despite the unavailability of the tools we depend on today, explosive growth continued as Jesus-followers received Spirit-led ministry from one another in small groups (1 Co 14:26). This reproducible group process resulted in multiplying, Spirit-led, loving obedience to Jesus which rapidly drew yet others to follow Him.

### ***Training for Obedience***

My wife and I sometimes encounter resistance in our children to learning things for which they lack skills and positive experiences, like public speaking. Teaching them about the value of speaking skills reduced this resistance but didn't overcome it. However they did acquire significant skills and positive experiences in public speaking by training with peers in a competitive speech league. Where they were resistant before, now they are grateful.

Information and doctrine are of value,<sup>4</sup> but these alone are generally not enough to move believers past inhibitions rooted in lack of skills and experience. Overcoming such obstacles usually also requires some combination of

Holy Spirit conviction,

group encouragement,

appropriate skills, and

positive experiences.

In witnessing, for example, doctrinal teaching and how-to resources are enough for a small percentage of believers who seem to have a natural gifting or personality that makes sharing their faith easy.<sup>5</sup> But other believers, who feel awkward in sharing their faith, may compare themselves with those who seem to find witnessing easy and end up feeling inadequate and inferior. Without Spirit-led group training they may still push themselves sporadically, only to conclude based on negative experiences that God simply hasn't gifted or called them to actively sharing their faith.

However as the Training for Trainers (T4T) movement shows, appropriate group encouragement and the cultivation of related skills with reliance on the Holy Spirit can play a transforming role in leading people to positive experiences in sharing their faith.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Teaching without Training***

Unfortunately, the Western church relies heavily on teaching people doctrine and information alone, without complementary group training in Spirit-led application. This is a very slow approach to overcoming personal obstacles to obedience. Such teaching should be a complement to training in Spirit-led obedience, or even a component of such training, but not an exclusive replacement for it.

Yet in Western seminaries, church gatherings, small groups, and other ministry contexts, the teaching of doctrine and information is generally isolated from training in Spirit-led obedience. This heavy reliance on human teaching—without training in Spirit-led obedience—often “trains” those who sit under such teaching to ...

rely on human experts (rather than the Holy Spirit),

pursue knowledge (rather obedience to what one already knows), and

direct others to an expert (rather than discipling them to Jesus).

The result is a largely stagnant Western church in which only two percent are active “fishers of men.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***Training with Teaching***

All the major doctrines of the faith are required for obedience, so there is ample opportunity to teach doctrine while training groups in Spirit-led obedience. All such doctrines can and often should be taught inductively from stories in the Bible in a way which cultivates reliance on the Holy Spirit to speak through His Word—rather than reliance on someone else to interpret God’s Word for them. Whenever the Holy Spirit leads us to present information or teach doctrine, we must also train the group to listen together to the Holy Spirit, and to test what we teach against the Scripture.

Our role in training all peoples to obey is not merely to

pass on knowledge, or

tell them what to believe.

Our role is to train them to

evaluate all doctrines and activities by God’s Word,

interact with one another to agree on what the Holy Spirit is saying to them,

help one another overcome cultural and internal obstacles to obedience, and

act in loving obedience to Jesus, both individually and collectively.

### ***Rediscovering Obedience***

Love for Christ is demonstrated in obedience to His commandments (Jn 14:15).

In 1976 George Patterson introduced Obedience Oriented Education<sup>8</sup>—a practical group process for training pastors to train others in Spirit-led, loving obedience to Christ. This resulted in the Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches<sup>9</sup> and inspired other Church Planting Movements<sup>10</sup> which have borne fruit reminiscent of the book of Acts.

Patterson’s original model was developed for pastors in an effort to integrate formal theological education with pastoral ministry. Later adaptations by Patterson and others have become less directive, more inductive and interactive, and applicable to every believer.

## ***Group Guidance***

Western individualism is reinforced by the absence of a distinction in English between the plural and singular “you.” Even though nearly all of the commands and promises of Scripture were originally addressed to groups, we tend to read such passages only for personal application.<sup>11</sup>

“Personal devotions” have many benefits, but they can leave believers with a bewildering mix of real and imagined guidance. They should not be considered an adequate substitute for the group interaction Jesus modeled.<sup>12</sup>

A more reliable approach to discerning God’s guidance is inductive group discovery of what God is saying from His Word—to whole groups as well as to individuals. This requires the full active participation of everyone, as directed by Paul:

When you come together, everyone has a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Co 14:26).<sup>13</sup>

In most societies, family and community remains the primary context in which believers will gather to pursue guidance and obedience. Church Planting Movements and Jesus Movements<sup>14</sup> demonstrate the wisdom and fruitfulness of trusting the Holy Spirit to guide and empower such local believers in obeying God’s Word within their own context, free of imported church culture. Such movements also display the Holy Spirit’s sufficiency even where access to the Bible is nearly as limited as it was in the book of Acts.

## ***Training for Obedience***

Teaching information or doctrine to individuals isn’t the same as training groups to obey Jesus. Training groups in Spirit-led, loving obedience requires two-way interaction which facilitates each group member in:

- discussing what God is telling them through His Word and His Spirit,
- identifying and addressing obstacles to obedience (such as fear),
- developing skills for obedience through “safe” practice in the group,
- making specific plans to obey and praying together over those plans, and
- debriefing later to celebrate victories and address remaining obstacles.

The common fruitfulness of Church Planting Movements and Jesus Movements demonstrates the Holy Spirit’s eagerness to reproduce groups of people which gather to hear and obey Jesus. Here

are two examples:<sup>15</sup>

Training for Trainers (T4T) grows by training believers

first in basic skills to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in leading non-believers to follow Christ,

then to guide these new believers in Spirit-led obedience in leading others to Christ and a few other explicit commands the early Church was swift to obey, and

finally to train the resulting groups to continue relying on the Spirit's guidance to empower them to interpret and obey God's Word.

Discovery Bible Study (DBS) grows by

inviting non-believers to explore God's Word together, and

following patterns with them from the start which become obedience as the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to them.

### ***Conclusion***

Where the Church reduces the Great Commission to teaching information and cultivating a dependence on human leadership, obedience to Christ tends to be slow and sporadic, and movements do not flourish.

But the evidence from recent Church Planting Movements and Jesus Movements demonstrates that the Holy Spirit can start a movement through anyone Jesus leads to train groups to adapt Jesus' training model under the Holy Spirit's guidance. Where this is being done today, the results are still "turning the world upside down."<sup>16</sup>

### ***Resources for Application***

David Watson's Discovery Bible Study.<sup>16</sup>

George Patterson's People of Yes.<sup>17</sup>

Steve Smith/Ying Kai's Training for Trainers (T4T).<sup>18</sup>

David Garrison's Church Planting Movements.<sup>19</sup>